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ABSTRACT

In the light of recent initiatives, new questions have arisen regarding the federal role in literacy. Although federal adult literacy efforts have been ineffective, the link between literacy and the productivity of the work force may justify a stronger national investment in literacy. Among the major federally supported literacy programs are the Adult Basic Education matching grants to state and local programs, Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, Even Start, Job Training Partnership Act, Indian Education Act, Library Services Act, Department of Justice, Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), Adult Education for the Homeless, Family Support Act, Food Stamp Program, Higher Education Act, and the Workplace Literacy section of the Adult Education Act. Other political initiatives include the Jump Start report and the establishment of the Barbara Bush Foundation for intergenerational literacy efforts. Criticisms of various initiatives include disagreement with Jump Start's premises that more can be done with not much more money and that emphasis should be on leadership from the top. Three primary needs at the federal level are (1) enhancing the quality and accountability of adult literacy programs; (2) establishing labor force development as a goal of Adult Education Act programs; and (3) increasing financial support for adult literacy in all sectors. (A listing of questions to ask focuses on looking at reports of programs and checking on current program activities. Addresses and telephone numbers are listed for 10 sources of information in the area of federal initiatives on literacy.) (CML)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

MYTH #11:

THE 'FEDS' ARE READYING A CAMPAIGN ON LITERACY

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Is 1989 "the year of opportunity for adult literacy in the United States," as a report on federal policies for adult literacy claimed earlier this year? Or is that statement more rhetorical than realistic?

Undoubtedly, adult literacy is being talked about a lot in Washington, D.C. Several bills have been introduced or are being readied. President Bush pledged to work to eradicate illiteracy within eight years. First Lady Barbara Bush intends to make literacy her major public effort. And as long as workforce productivity remains a hot topic among policymakers, adult literacy will be part of the discussions.

Yet, any massive national effort focused on the literacy problems of 20 to 30 million adults already in the workforce could be undermined by two factors. One is the low priority traditionally given to adult literacy by the federal bureaucracy. The other is money, or the lack of it.

Further, a fundamental policy issue is emerging that has not been fully debated. Corporate America assumes much of the responsibility for retraining employees to handle new, more sophisticated tasks--an investment estimated by the American Society for Training and Development to total as much as $210 billion a year. However, ASTD also says that only 1 percent of this goes for basic skills training.

The constant rollover of corporate ownership may be diminishing attention to human resource development within business/industry. Workers may not stay in one job for an extended period of time; middle management is contracting rather than expanding, thus restricting upward mobility within business and devaluing some forms of training; and job descriptions change with the technology.

These changes create new questions for national policy. Does the demand for greater action on adult literacy stem more from business/industry job transformations than from the lack of basic skills by workers? If so, why should the responsibility for retraining, other than of the unemployed, shift from the private sector to the federal level? Conversely, does the fluid characteristic of jobs, which is expected to be a permanent change in the workplace, justify a much stronger national investment in adult literacy, both to protect workers and to help productivity? Should the federal role focus only on workplace skills?

Always a Stepchild

Adult literacy is not accustomed to provoking such profound policy questions. For 25 years it has languished at the federal level under other programs with greater visibility and clout. In a paper on federal policies regarding adult literacy for the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, William Pierce concludes that despite well-meaning supporters, "the federal initiative in adult literacy has been minimal, inefficient and ineffective." He provides several reasons:

- o Appropriations for adult literacy total only about 40 percent of authorized funding, proof of its lack of status in Congress and various Administrations.
- o No consistent federal policy has guided the growth of programs since they began in 1965.
- o As programs expanded outside of the original Adult Education Act, they became a hodgepodge of target groups served, program purposes and program placement.

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o No coordination among these programs exists.

o The major program, adult education, is badly flawed because it does not provide for systematic data collection and reporting, research and development, teacher training, professionalization of the field, development of materials and dissemination and network development among state and local efforts.

o Placing the adult education program within the Department of Education, dedicated to serving children and youth, ensures minimal attention to adult literacy.

Adult basic education first appeared in federal programs under the Office of Economic Opportunity. Two years later, without any discussion or debate, Congress transferred the program to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, thus "assigning the responsibility for improving adult literacy to education administrators and teachers who were neither experienced with providing adult services nor especially dedicated to doing so." Pierce notes that Congress just as easily could have transferred Adult Basic Education Programs to the Department of Labor, as it did the Job Corps.

(More than two decades later, it became the Department of Labor, not the Department of Education, which pushed for greater attention to adult literacy, particularly under former Secretary of Labor William Brock.)

Federal investment in adult education grew considerably in the beginning, from an initial appropriation of $20.7 million in 1966 to $162 million in fiscal 1989. But in the past decade, federal investment, while increasing 50 percent in current dollars, actually decreased 13 percent in constant 1985 dollars. However, state funding of adult literacy programs continued to increase; between 1976 and 1988, it jumped 221 percent in constant 1985 dollars.

Participation under the Adult Basic Education program has increased by 41 percent during the past six years, but non-English-speaking enrollees dominate the influx of those seeking literacy programs. They represent 57 percent of the enrollment of 3.1 million. The average of females in Adult Basic Education programs is high--55 percent for the last eight years. The dropout rate from ABE programs also is high--more than 52 percent.

Pierce also contends that the major federal initiative in adult education provides no support system--for the development of a profession, for research and the development of appropriate materials or for evaluation.

A Little Federal Debate

Over the years, other initiatives that touch on adult literacy were approved by Congress, haphazardly. In May 1986 a contractor for the Federal Interagency Committee on Education reported that 79 different programs in 14 agencies provided adult literacy or literacy-related activities, for a total expenditure of more than $347 million (1985 figures). However, the estimated dollar figure excluded almost one-half of the programs listed.

Congress answered this Reagan Administration study with one of its own. The House Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary and Vocational Education contended that the actual number of federal programs directly concerned with adult literacy totaled only 10, and that the 1985 expenditure was only $126.5 million.

The conclusion must be, says Pierce, that "no one really knows how much is being spent by the federal government on adult literacy."

Current and Pending

Congress is quite aware of the problem of adult illiteracy and keeps pecking away at it. There were more than 50 proposals regarding adult literacy introduced in the last Congress, and a few made it into various pieces of legislation. Indicative of the scattershot approach still being taken at the federal level is the list of recent initiatives, including:

o Establishment of a Literacy Corps under VISTA

o Inclusion of mandatory remedial education programs in the Job Training Partnership Act

o Passage of the Even Start Act, aimed at helping parents of young children

o Inclusion of literacy in the 8 percent state education coordination grants under the Job Training Partnership Act

o Inclusion of literacy components in the omnibus trade act.

A Congressional Task Force on Illiteracy, sponsored by the Congressional Institute on the Future, attempted to coordinate ideas and keep Congressional staffs informed about various initiatives during 1987 and 1988. The office of Technology Assessment currently is conducting a year-long study on training in the workplace.

Particularly concerned with adult literacy are those members of Congress working with the Sunbelt Institute, especially Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.) and Rep. David Price (D-N.C.). A report prepared for the institute by MDC, Inc., "Workforce Literacy in the South," points out that federally funded adult basic education programs reach only 5 percent of the undereducated population in the South, with an average per pupil expenditure of just $111.

A comprehensive system for teaching undereducated adults will not evolve in the South or elsewhere, says the institute, "unless Congress reshapes the federal role in literacy and sets more specific goals for its literacy programs." It cites three primary needs at the federal level:

o Enhancing the quality and accountability of adult literacy programs (research, data, training, evaluation).

o Establishing "labor force development" as a direct goal of Adult Education Act programs.

o Increasing financial support for adult literacy by all sectors through educating the public, requiring increases in matching funds, encouraging greater private sector support and increasing federal funds.

Four months later, in January 1989, the Southport Institute released its report on adult literacy, "Jump Start," considered the first detailed examination of federal policies in this area. It found some of the same flaws as the Sunbelt Institute. Focusing also on workplace issues, this report, by Forrest Chisman, contends that most public and private programs are targeted at the unemployed and unavailable to adults already on the job. Deciding that reform of adult literacy policies is a "doable" initiative--primarily because the adult literacy constituencies are not well organized--the report recommends reorganization of priorities, accompanied by an additional $550 million in federal funding. This could provide the "jump start" needed to vitalize the issue, it says. Included in its proposals:

o Executive leadership that would establish a six-month task force within the administration to develop a strategic plan and a Cabinet Council on Adult Literacy.

o New legislation such as an Adult Basic Skills Act of 1989 that would set up a quasi-governmental National Center for Adult Literacy to conduct research; matching grants to encourage state and local governments to invest in innovation in training and technology; and an 8 percent setaside from education and training funds for governors to promote innovative adult literacy initiatives.

o Enhancement of existing federal programs by placing a greater emphasis upon workforce literacy in the Job Training Partnership Act, Vocational Education Act, Adult Education Act and the Family Support Act.

"Jump Start" is the inspiration behind several new bills introduced or being prepared. Cooper has introduced a proposal to establish a National Center for Adult Literacy (H.R. 970) to conduct research, provide technical assistance and training and help policymakers evaluate adult literacy efforts. With start-up funding of $15 million, Cooper says the national center addresses the highest priorities in a field where "so much needs to be done...in a time of limited resources."

Rep. Thomas Sawyer (D-Oh.) is drafting a bill that will be comprehensive and include the major features of the "Jump Start" proposals, including a focus on

MAJOR FEDERALLY SUPPORTED LITERACY PROGRAMS

The panorama of federally supported literacy programs resembles a shopping mall, with small programs tucked in between large ones. A local reporter could find them in:

Adult Basic Education
Matching grants to state and local agencies, with a majority of programs operated by existing educational agencies (moonlighting teachers account for more than one-half of the adult educators).

Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act
Two setasides in the current legislation--for adults in need of training and for single parents/homemakers--provide more than is available under the Adult Education Act ($158 million in fiscal 1989 compared to $136 million for adult education). However, Congressional staff found that many states keep no reliable data on how much vocational education money is spend on adult literacy programs.

Even Start
A new program, with $14.8 million appropriated in fiscal 1989, to provide intergenerational literacy services to parents of pre-school children.

Job Training Partnership Act
Funds under this act can be used for literacy and basic skills training, bilingual training and remedial education, estimated by the Department of Labor to total $184 million in fiscal 1989.

Indian Education Act
A section of this act specifically authorizes literacy programs for adults, which received $4 million from Congress in fiscal 1989.

Library Services Act
The Library Literacy Programs under this act received $4.7 million in fiscal 1989 to provide direct services to illiterate adults or to train librarians and volunteers to teach illiterate adults.

Department of Justice
Any federal prison inmate who does not test at a sixth grade reading level must attend an Adult Basic Education program for at least 90 days. The Federal Bureau of Prisons estimates it spends up to $5 million a year for basic skills programs.

VISTA
About 55 percent of VISTA funds, or more than $13 million, goes for literacy projects, most of it to pay stipends to VISTA volunteers.

Adult Education for the Homeless
Under the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, more than $7 million was set aside by Congress in fiscal 1989 for literacy training and basic skills remediation of adults who are homeless. (An additional $12 million is authorized for the Department of Labor to provide job training, which may include basic skills training.)

Family Support Act
The welfare reform legislation of 1988, this act authorizes basic education and skills training, remedial education and instruction in English as a second language and requires these efforts to be coordinated at the state level with other federal programs, such as vocational education and job training. The authorized amount for 1989 is $600 million.

Food Stamp Program
States are required to provide employment training to eligible food stamp recipients, which can cover the improvement of basic skills.

Higher Education Act
Institutions of higher education can receive federal funds for literacy efforts in at least two ways--through programs that respond to the needs of functionally illiterate adults and through a program to provide training to adult educators.

Workplace Literacy
A new section of the Adult Education Act, this program provides up to 70 percent of the costs of adult literacy programs which teach workplace skills in partnership with private industry and/or labor. Another program, English Literacy grants, supplements ESL programs under the Adult Education Act. Appropriations in 1989 were about $12 million and $5 million, respectively.

workplace skills through a national center, state and regional councils, a Cabinet sub-group, coordination of existing programs and a new emphasis upon volunteer and community-based support of adult literacy programs.

Rep. William Goodling (R-Pa.), ranking member of the House Education and Labor Committee, is working on a proposal to establish a trust fund with dedicated resources to support comprehensive investments in adult literacy.

Sen. Paul Simon's Illiteracy Elimination Act also would establish a Cabinet-level coordinating body, increase services to families with illiterate parents, increase reading resources for children, use college students in literacy efforts, and expand worksite programs and community literacy programs.

John Jennings, counsel to the House Education and Labor Committee, is pessimistic about any major federal activity because of poor timing and no money. The opening to revise adult education programs was last year, when elementary and secondary education legislation was up for renewal (ABE falls under the elementary and secondary authorization).

Renewal of the Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act is working its way through Congress this year and will include equal attention to basic skills and vocational skills, Jennings says. However, it will be four years before ABE is considered again. Further, the constrictions on the federal budget preclude almost any new initiatives in education, he adds.

A View from the Trenches

The premises of "Jump Start"--that much more can be done with not much more money and that the emphasis should be on leadership from the top--do not go over well with some of those working at the grassroots level, primarily in community-based literacy programs.

One of the most outspoken is Catherine Baker of PLAN (Push Literacy Action Now) in Washington, D.C. She believes the Southport Institute analysis vastly underestimates the amount of money needed for its goal--to assure that every adult, by the turn of the century, "has the skills needed to perform effectively the tasks required by a high-productivity economy." Minimum spending--$200 per adult--on the 20 million adults considered functionally illiterate would require $2.7 billion more than estimated by "Jump Start," she says.

Further, Baker contends the report is based on too many assumptions--about what the target group perceives as its needs and about the efficacy of technology and parent-child "community learning." While it supports training of educators in the adult literacy field, the report does not address the problem of excessively low pay once they are trained, she points out.

No hearings have been set yet on any proposals. Once on the agenda, they will provide an opportunity to learn more about the rationale for and potential of a national effort for adult literacy from policymakers, researchers, advocates and especially the business community.

THE BARBARA BUSH FOUNDATION: A FAMILY AFFAIR

Family literacy has been a major interest of Barbara Bush for many years. In March she announced the formation of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy to "build a nation of readers by building families of readers."

The Foundation will award grants to establish intergenerational literacy efforts, provide seed money for community planning of interagency family literacy programs, support the training of teachers, encourage the recognition of educators and programs and disseminate information about effective programs.

Mrs. Bush, honorary chairwoman of the foundation, said the effort "is just one way to express my commitment to solving the serious problem of illiteracy in our country ... We will support programs that bring parents and children together to build their reading and literacy skills."

Joan Abrahamson, president of the Jefferson Institute in Los Angeles, Calif., is chairman of the board. The executive director is Benita Somerfield, president of Simon & Schuster Workplace Resources of New York City and a former adult literacy consultant in the U.S. Office of Education.

Questions to Ask

Apparently, both federal and state officials lack data about how much adult literacy efforts are being carried out under various federally funded programs. A reporter might begin by looking at reports submitted by the programs to state or federal officials, then check on current activities.

Is as much literacy training taking place as claimed? How much of programs are for literacy training in private employment?

How is it evaluated, e.g. what is the dropout rate from the different programs? Do some seem to work better than others? If so, why?

How much coordination of programs is taking place?

How do the regulations regarding literacy programs mesh with the needs of recipients? For example, is a 90-day experience for those in prison realistically extensive enough to do any good?

How do adults needing literacy programs find out about them? Do they tend to drift from one program to another?

How much of the effort with federal funds goes toward employed adults as opposed to those unemployed?

How much of the adult basic education programs are taken up by English-as-a-second-language classes?

How much money is business putting up in matching funds?

Sources

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